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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000408

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SUBJECT: RUSSIA FIGHTS BACK: TURKMENISTAN'S BERDIMUHAMMEDOV
SUMMONED TO MOSCOW

REF: ASHGABAT 371

Classified By: Charge d' Affaires Jennifer L. Brush for Reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) President Berdimuhammedov's upcoming April 23-24 visit to Moscow, reported yesterday in Russian press, comes amidst growing signs that Russia is pushing hard to preserve its influence -* politically, economically, and in the cultural sphere -* in post-Niyazov Turkmenistan. Berdimuhammedov and his ruling circle appear increasingly receptive to Russian advances, accepting invitations from Russia while refusing meetings with Western officials, and continuing a pattern of harassment of USG-sponsored programs. End Summary.

BERDIMUHAMMEDOV SUMMONED TO MOSCOW

2. (U) Russian press yesterday reported that President Berdimuhammedov planned to visit Moscow from April 23-24 on Russian President Putin's invitation. According to Russian press, the trip is a working visit and Berdimuhammedov and Putin will meet to discuss bilateral relations and regional problems. The trip has not yet been publicized in Turkmenistan's media, but an announcement is expected at today's meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers.

MOSCOW VISIT TRUMPS MEETINGS WITH WESTERN OFFICIALS

3. (C) Foreign Minister Meredov told Charge during an April 19 meeting that Turkmenistan was postponing meetings with visiting U.S. Army Central Command's General Whitcomb because of an "urgent business trip," Berdimuhammedov's working visit to Russia. Meredov also postponed meetings with a U.S. delegation led by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Steven Mann planning to arrive on April 28, and

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insisted that this delegation's meetings could not be held before late May or early June.

4. (C) At an April 20 "sadaka" ceremony honoring

Berdimammedov,s safe return from Saudi Arabia, Charge attempted to pass Meredov a letter from PDAS Mann outlining USG intentions, but Meredov refused to accept the letter in person and by COB, MFA Protocol instructed Charge to bring the letter to MFA at 0900 on April 21.

15. (C) OSCE representatives told Charge on April 19 that President Berdimammedov refused to see OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Rolf Ekeus, which the OSCE considered a negative sign indicating a turn for the worse in relations with Berdimammedov,s administration. (Note: Niyazov met with Ekeus several times. End Note.)

BERDIMHAMMEDOV MEETING WITH SISTEMA EXECUTIVES: NEW INROADS FOR RUSSIAN BUSINESS

16. (U) This morning's Neutralny Turkmenistan newspaper featured above-the-fold coverage of Berdimammedov,s meeting yesterday with the board of directors of Russia's joint stock financial company Sistema. System's delegation included the chairman of the board of directors, Vladimir Evtushenkov, the company's president Alexander Goncharuk, and the president of the Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) open join-stock company, Leonid Melamed. (Note: Sistema is a large publicly traded company that owns local cell phone service provider MTS and also is active throughout the CIS in service sectors ranging from insurance and banking to tourism and information technology. End Note.) Russian Ambassador to Turkmenistan Blatov also attended the meeting. He told Charge at the sadaka that Sistema was the largest company of its kind in Europe, though the company's site (<http://www.sistema.com>) states it is the largest private sector consumer services company in Russia and the CIS.

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17. (U) According to the press report, the meeting centered on discussion of prospects for developing cooperation in a wide range of priority areas, including oil and gas, communications, computer technology, industrial and civil construction, education, health care and tourism. Berdimammedov invited the company to participate in the bidding process for tenders to build an addition to the Russian-Turkmen school and to equip this and other educational institutions with computers. Berdimammedov invited the company to participate in exploration of the Caspian basin and in increasing tourism in western Turkmenistan near the Caspian (Note: the President has issued this invitation to other companies as well, and it is not clear that he favors Sistema above other companies. End Note). The press report carried Evtushenko's improbable quote that Sistema could offer its famous "first-class" hostelry services in building spas throughout Turkmenistan.

18. (U) System's presentation to Berdimammedov was an indicator of strong interest from the Russian side, but the president made no promises regarding Sistema's involvement in Turkmenistan. Sistema representatives outlined their interest in working in each of the sectors highlighted by Berdimammedov during his presidential campaign, with an emphasis on education and information technology, but the company appears less interested in investment than in nailing down service sector contracts.

PUTIN TO VISIT ASHGABAT IN MAY?

19. (C) The Russian Defense Attache told embassy Defense Attache that Berdimammedov would be traveling to Moscow in late April and that Putin was planning a visit to Ashgabat in mid-May following a CIS-related conference in Astana. (Comment: Meredov denied knowledge of this visit in an April 19 meeting with Charge. End Comment.)

110. (C) Berdimammedov has received a stream of high-level

Russian visitors since Niyazov's death: Prime Minister Fradkov (both at the funeral and at the inauguration), Foreign Minister Lavrov, and most recently the Governor of Astrakhan. Russian attempts at "soft diplomacy," outlined in reftel, represent a new front in Russia's effort to engage with Turkmenistan.

CONSIDERING MILITARY COOPERATION WITH RUSSIA

¶11. (C) The Russian Defense Attache also said that a Turkmenistan "tender committee," headed by Deputy Chief of the State Counter Narcotics Commission Myrat Yslamov, was in the process of putting out a tender to purchase Russian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian spare parts, military uniforms and boots, and other equipment. (Comment: Although Turkmenistan's military has Soviet-origin equipment, since independence all purchases have been made via Ukraine, first as barter for gas, and now for cash. Turkmenistan has always boasted to visiting U.S. officials that it consistently refuses Russian offers of military sales or assistance. End Note.)

¶12. (C) Foreign Minister Meredov told Charge on April 19 that Defense Minister Mammetgeldiyev has also been called away for the "urgent business trip" on April 23-24. Ministry of Defense Protocol subsequently informed embassy Defense Attache that Mammetgeldiyev would be traveling on April 22-25 and would only be able to meet on April 26.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WEST DETERIORATING

¶13. (C) At an April 19 farewell to the German DCM, local diplomats commiserated on the apparently intentional deterioration of relations between Berdimuhammedov's administration and the west, in particular commenting on the glaring affront to OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities Rolf Ekeus. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) representative Tony Myron told Charge a high-ranking EBRD official's visit also had been postponed by the MFA.

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CULTURAL HARASSMENT CONTINUES

¶14. (U) In a seeming reversal of the positive cooperation and coverage of USG-sponsored programs immediately following Berdimuhammedov's inauguration, e.g., a Fulbright Conference, and speakers Doctors Bertram Ransom and Gregory Payne speaking on civil rights and rule of law, on April 19 local officials in Turkmenbashi City refused theater access to visiting American jazz group Ari Roland. Ari Roland instead played on the street to an appreciative crowd.

GERMAN CHICKEN FARM SHUT DOWN ONCE AND FOR ALL

¶15. (C) European diplomats in Ashgabat told Charge on April 19 that Berdimuhammedov probably would reject Western investment in favor of the tried and true Russian monopoly. German Ambassador Mondorf told Charge "it's all over," and later sent her a communication between the MFA and the German Embassy ordering the German partner to remove all equipment from the premises. The Turkmenistani partners remain in jail; all, according to the German Ambassador, in violation of a valid bilateral trade agreement.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Russia appears to be succeeding in either seducing or threatening Berdimuhammedov *- or both. Although Turkmenistan adheres in principle to its foreign policy of permanent, positive neutrality, Russian inroads since

December suggest that neutrality will be difficult for the new president to sustain under pressure. High-level U.S. delegations have been answered by even higher-level Russian visits, and the significance of these visits, compounded by the continuing absence of a U.S. Ambassador, is not lost on Berdimuhammedov. The president's refusal to meet Western officials and continuing harassment for U.S.-sponsored cultural programs in the regions is a frustrating return to Niyazov-era tactics and may reflect a decision on the part of Turkmenistan's government to forego promises of U.S. assistance in favor of the political security offered by engagement with Russia. End Comment.
BRUSH